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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000189

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [KDEM](#) [IR](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: IRANIAN ELECTIONS AND MEDIA: "PRESS TV FOR
MOUSAVI"

REF: 2008 ISTANBUL 498

Classified By: Acting Principal Officer Sandra Oudkirk; Reason 1.5 (d).

11. (C/NOFORN) Summary and Comment: The Istanbul correspondent for Iran's "Press TV" news channel (please strictly protect) told us that a sizable majority of Press TV reporters, editors, and producers openly support Iranian presidential candidate Mousavi and oppose Ahmadinejad. Despite Press TV management's injunction to staff to stay neutral, our contact described staff putting up "Press TV for Mousavi" banners in the newsroom, purposely wearing green clothing (Mousavi's campaign color) on air, and posting stories on the website critical enough of Ahmadinejad -- blaming him for blocking Facebook and for distorting the record of a past Iranian nuclear negotiator -- that the Interior Ministry demanded the offending reporters be fired (they were suspended). Our contact claimed Press TV is the most western-oriented and credible branch of the IRIB, Iran's government-controlled media. She agreed many stories posted to Press TV's website were propagandistic, but insisted the channel's live TV coverage is more objective. She said Press TV "is getting more serious", noting that managers have agreed to provide journalism training for staff in Iran, and have fired reporters (including an Ankara correspondent) for poor performance. Comment: Given that its target audience is not the average Iranian voter, we doubt even blatantly pro-Mousavi coverage from Press TV will have a notable impact on Iranian voting intentions. But these anecdotes do reinforce an impression that among Iran's educated, professional classes (including, but not limited to, IRIB journalists and others receiving a GOI salary), Mousavi appears to be drawing strong support and generating real enthusiasm. End Summary and Comment.

12. (C/NOFORN) We met recently with the Istanbul correspondent for Iran's satellite news channel "Press TV" (please strictly protect). The UK national, who previously worked for Al-Jazeera, has worked for Press TV since summer 2007, making her one of the channel's more experienced and longest tenured foreign correspondents. She is periodically willing to share opinions with us about working for Press TV, but has asked that we treat her insights in strictest confidence to protect her job security.

"Press TV for Mousavi"
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13. (C/NOFORN) Our contact told us that a sizable majority of her colleagues at Press TV's Tehran headquarters openly and vocally support Mir Hossein Mousavi in Iran's presidential campaign. Many colleagues have circulated pro-Mousavi petitions, blog sites, videos, and news items by email, including to Press TV collective email addresses that even Press TV's managers receive. Some have also emailed around

strongly anti-Ahmadinejad messages and jokes and openly express disdain for the current President. "If there are pro-Ahmadinejad supporters on staff, they keep it quiet", she told us. Colleagues have sent her photos showing pro-Mousavi posters and banners hanging prominently in the Press TV newsroom (including one that said "Press TV for Mousavi" in English), and she suggested there is now a friendly competition among some reporters to see who can wear more green clothing (comment: Mousavi's campaign color) on air. She said this activity recently prompted Press TV's management to warn staff to stay neutral and to only express personal political opinions outside of work.

Press TV Stories stepping over an "Anti-Ahmadinejad" line
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¶4. (C/NOFORN) At least two Press TV reporters faced disciplinary measures because of stories they posted to Press TV's website, according to our contact. Those stories were seen by the Interior Ministry as unacceptably critical of Ahmadinejad, prompting GOI officials to ask Press TV managers to fire the reporters. (The reporters have been suspended but remain on staff for now, our contact told us.)

-- The first Press TV article, which appeared on May 23, reported on the GOI's most recent blocking of Facebook, suggesting that Ahmadinejad was responsible for the decision. (Ahmadinejad denied having ordered the most recent Facebook blockage, which has since been lifted.)

-- The second Press TV article, which appeared May 25, reported on a statement issued by the Expediency Council's

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Center for Strategic Research (CSR, the GOI's leading think-tank, largely pro-Rafsanjani) which warned Ahmadinejad not to distort the negotiating record of former Iranian nuclear negotiator (and current CSR President) Hassan Rowhani. The CSR's warning to Ahmadinejad came in response to an article in a pro-Ahmadinejad daily, Vatan-e Emruz, which alleged that Rowhani had been prepared in 2005 to accept an EU3 demand that Iran suspend its enrichment program for 10 years. The CSR statement, as reported by Press TV, accused Ahmadinejad of planting the story as a way to undermine Mousavi's campaign (which is supported by most of the CSR's leadership and staff), and called on the Iranian judiciary to take legal action against the newspaper for false reporting. The CSR statement, as reported by Press TV, also warned Ahmadinejad that further dishonest accusations from his campaign would force CSR to reveal documents relating to Ahmadinejad's handling of the nuclear issue "that would show the nation what price they have paid for the inefficiency of certain officials in recent years." Our contact explained that the real conflict here is between the CSR and the Ahmadinejad campaign, but that Press TV is an easier target than CSR for the Interior Ministry to go after.

Press TV: "Getting more serious"?
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¶5. (C/NOFORN) In response to questions about the degree of editorial control exercised by Tehran, our contact explained that the staff on Press TV's assignments and editorial desks, who request stories on specific subjects, are "more political, and more controlling" than the news desk, which is staffed largely by younger and more western-oriented staff who see themselves more as journalists than GOI employees. The assignment desk tends to ask for stories that highlight the "global unpopularity" of U.S. foreign policy as compared to the "more humanitarian and tolerant positions taken by countries like Iran." As one example, the correspondent was called urgently by the assignments desk on May 20, told to file a report on the arson of eight mosques in Istanbul the previous day, and told to describe it as an anti-AKP move by secular extremists possibly supported by the USG. The correspondent refused, noting that Turkish press had already

confirmed the arsonist was a diagnosed schizophrenic, not a violent secularist or USG agent. The assignment desk relented.

¶6. (C/NOFORN) The editorial desk sets reporting "redlines", she noted, which currently include any reporting on Kurdish issues or reporting critical of the Turkish Government's Ergenekon prosecutions. Current "pink lines" include reporting that is critical of PM Erdogan or overly positive about President Obama's popularity in Turkey. She told us she recently "flummoxed" her editors when she sent in a story reporting on a U.S. think tank's estimate of the number of tactical nuclear weapons deployed at Incirlik Air Base in southeastern Turkey. The editors were shocked that U.S.-controlled nuclear weapons might still be in Turkey. One editor wanted to make it Press TV website's top story, illustrating the "aggressive military posture" of the USG in the region. Another editor told her not to post it at all, because he thought it made the Turkish government look too subservient. As a result, that story remains on hold, pending a final editorial decision.

¶7. (C/NOFORN) Our contact is nevertheless frustrated by Press TV's poor reputation in the U.S. and Europe. She admitted Press TV's website -- which the editorial desk oversees -- tends towards a "propagandistic" line, but claimed that live reporting from most of Press TV's correspondents tends to be better, and "is on the way to being objective." She also claimed that even the editorial desk takes a pragmatic approach regarding Israel. Press TV's staff is largely indifferent to Israel as both a news story and as a perceived threat to Iran, she claimed. To most of Press TV's editors and reporters, the real story, and the real threat to Iranian interests and stability, is Pakistan and the Taliban, and the risk of growing instability on Iran's eastern border.

¶8. (C/NOFORN) Overall, Press TV "is getting more serious" as a news service, she claimed. Press TV's managers have agreed to provide more professional media training for staff in Iran, though she has asked for equivalent funding so she can take advanced journalism courses in Turkey (her request is pending). Press TV has also fired several reporters, including a recently-hired Ankara correspondent, for poor performance. She suggested that Press TV's management is trying harder to focus on Press TV's "target audience and

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core mission." She described the target audience as Muslims (not necessarily only Iranians) living in America and Europe. She described the core mission as two-fold: To portray Islam as a peaceful religion and a positive global influence, and to position Iran as a leader of the Islamic world's growing, independent, worldwide media presence, i.e., as a competitor to Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. She said she hopes a renewed focus on this mission will allow Press TV to move away from its knee-jerk focus on U.S. foreign policy or crises in the Middle East.

Comment
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¶9. (C/NOFORN): Given that Press TV's target audience -- English speaking Muslims in the U.S. and Europe -- is a demographic somewhat removed from the average Iranian voter, Press TV's reporting is likely to have little influence over Iranian voting preferences on June 12. But the reportedly strong pro-Mousavi leanings of this IRIB outlet remain significant to the extent they reflect wider views among journalists and other educated, professional Iranians, even among those receiving a GOI salary. Based on these and other anecdotal reports we've heard, Mousavi appears to be drawing strong support and generating real enthusiasm among these influential classes of Iranians. End comment.
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